

# Non-Arab Women in the Arab World

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Delineating gender and cultural identities is closely related to power. Rarely, if ever, are individuals permitted to freely choose how they wish to live their lives as women or men, as members or outsiders vis-à-vis the societal mainstream.

This issue of *Al-Raida* deals with the many forms of “not-belonging” and the struggle for recognition within the member states of the Arab League. It is divided into five sections reflecting the disparate vantage points from which non-Arab women have viewed their role in the Arab world over a period of over 150 years.

In the first section, both Rabha El Asri and Arda Dargarabedian portray the position of two of the most significant non-Arab ethnic groups in the region - the Berbers and Armenians - as members of these minorities. Dergarabedian reports on the initial results of one of Jordan's first scholarly surveys on its ethnic mix, whereas El Asri attempts to debunk the romanticised view of Berber mountain life. Juxtaposed to this position, L'Hocine Ukerdis and Ulbani Ait Frawsen expose the historical roots of the heroicised portrayal of Amazigh (Berber) women in the struggle of their people for cultural and political self-determination. One of the great disappoints in the production of this issue was our inability to find authors willing to write

background articles on the position of two of the other key ethnic groups in the region, the Maghreb Jews and Middle Eastern Kurdish populations.

Along with the region's indigenous ethnic groups, the immigrant minorities in the Arab world deserve particular attention. Focusing on the overlapping of issues of colour, class and gender, Alia Al Zoughbi demonstrates how being classified “Abed”<sup>1</sup> can lead to an almost total loss of social status in the Middle East. Ironically, as Mary Abowd points out, experiencing oppression, exploitation and a non-recognition of one's human rights does not protect employers from passing it own to their hired help. In the short interlude between the two Intifadas, Asian and Africa domestic workers were treated no better in Palestine than were their sisters in other parts of the Arab world.

Alisa Perkins and Maria F. Curtis provide insights into the lives of non-Arab women from the other side of the power-divide, illustrating the motives, experiences and integrational success stories typical of the life of Western women in modern Moroccan society. As a Malaysian academic, Azza Basarudin has written a moving portrayal of her personal experience as an Asian, non-Arab woman researching issues related to gender in the Arab world. Finally, both Jim

Ross-Nazzal and Aglaia Viviani have provided an historical vantage point from which to understand the way American and British women viewed Palestine and Egypt in the mid 19th century.

Some of the weaknesses of this issue's first section are made up for through the inclusion of powerfully individual testimonials by both indigenous minority women and Western women with a wealth of personal experience in the Arab world. Diane King reflects on her work researching the ethnic and gendered oppression of the women of Iraqi Kurdistan during the dark days at the end of the regime of Saddam Hussein. In her view, Kurdish women are far from being the "helpless victims" they are often portrayed as by well meaning Western NGOs. A good friend from my native Austria, Ingrid Jaradat Gassner describes the process of becoming Palestinian over a period of almost two decades. Arda Ekmekji compares herself to the layers of identity one finds in Beirut's old city. Her life as an Armenian academic in a number of Arab countries raises more questions than it answers about the true identity of the Middle East. Looking back over decades of feminist activism in her "native" Egypt, Margot Badran describes how the women's movement allowed her to join the Arab world via her dedication to female emancipation. Speaking from the perspective of a young Portuguese-German student of Palestinian origin living in Lebanon, Mona Katawi

provides a bridge to the last section of this issue, dealing with mixed marriages and the thorny topic of patrilineal cultural and citizenship rights.

Sharon Nagy has aptly juxtaposed the historical and current experience of Western and South East Asian women who have married into upper, middle and lower-middle class families in the Arabian peninsula during the last several decades. Rima Habib and Lina Abou-Habib provide an activist's insight into the struggle to find local support for the human rights of Arab women who have married non-nationals and thus seemingly forfeited their children's cultural identity.

The articles in this issue have opened the debate on who decides the nature of ethnic and gender identity in the region. Ultimately, consensual agreement on definitions is less important than the recognition of the synergetic overlap of both the individual and collective right to self-definition.

## End Notes

1. Significantly, the double meaning of the Arabic word "Abed," i.e. African and slave, finds its historical parallel in the European term "Slave," signifying both a social class and membership in the ranks of the Slavic forced labourers in the early Medieval Byzantine sugar industry.



An announcement on the bulletin board of one of the leisure clubs in Lebanon